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ABSTRACT

Learning style is a concept that can be important in the movement toward improved college teaching and learning. Information about students' learning style can help faculty become more sensitive to the differences students bring to the classroom and can guide the design of learning experiences that either match students' styles or stimulate learning in new ways. Information about learning style is also helpful in counseling and orientation and in staff utilization and development. The most pressing research needs are in the areas of (1) the learning styles of minority students and in the development of measurement instruments that take cultural attributes into account, (2) the effects of incongruence between teaching methods and students' learning styles, and (3) the relationships between learning style, developmental stage, disciplinary perspectives, and epistemology. More effective learning can be promoted through (1) professional development activities on the application of the concept of learning styles, (2) encouragement of classroom research, especially using the concept of learning styles, (3) developing curricular experiences that help students learn to learn, and (4) in hiring faculty, considering candidates' understanding of teaching-learning practices that take into account individual differences. (MSE)

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Learning Styles

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Teaching and learning practices in higher education urgently need improvement—witness the recommendations of several national commissions on higher education and the difficulties faculty face with the diverse preparation of today's students. Learning style is a concept that can be important in this movement, not only in informing teaching practices but also in bringing to the surface issues that help faculty and administrators think more deeply about their roles and the organizational culture in which they carry out their responsibilities.

Learning style has been the focus of considerable study, and a number of colleges and universities have made it an important part of their work. The many approaches to learning style can be examined at four levels: (1) personality, (2) information processing, (3) social interaction, and (4) instructional methods. One researcher, however, speculates that several models in fact describe correlates of two fundamental orientations in learning: "splitters," who tend to analyze information logically and break it down into smaller parts, and "lumpers," who tend to watch for patterns and relationships between the parts (Kirby 1979).

Learning Style Useful in Improving Students' Learning

Information about style can help faculty become more sensitive to the differences students bring to the classroom. It can also serve as a guide in designing learning experiences that match or mismatch students' styles, depending on the teacher's purpose. Matching is particularly appropriate in working with poorly prepared students and with new college students, as the most attrition occurs in those situations. Some studies show that identifying a student's style and then providing instruction consistent with that style contribute to more effective learning.

In other instances, some mismatching may be appropriate so that students' experiences help them to learn in new ways and to bring into play ways of thinking and aspects of the self not previously developed. Any mismatching, however, should be done with sensitivity and consideration for students, because the experience of discontinuity can be very threatening, particularly when students are weak in these areas. Knowledge of learning style can thus help faculty design experiences appropriate for students in terms of matching or mismatching and enable them to do so thoughtfully and systematically.

Outside the Classroom

Information about learning style is extremely helpful in student affairs. In counseling, for example, style may suggest which approaches to counseling to use for particular students. Further, when students have problems in courses, it can guide counselors' efforts at intervention. In orientation, it can help students understand their own preferences and strengths in learning and be a stimulus for developing new ways of learning.

Learning style is useful in the work setting as well. It enables administrative leaders to be more insightful about using staff members in ways that call on their greatest strengths—a particularly important feature in the future as colleges and universities focus more on individuals' ability to perform tasks than on where they are in the organizational hierarchy. At the same time, the use of information about learning styles reminds us that an institution that is seriously interested in the development of students as a purpose needs to embrace such a concept for faculty and administrators as well.

Additional Research Needed

The most pressing need is to learn more about the learning styles of minority students—a particularly important subject in the face of participation and graduation rates that indicate higher education is not serving black students well. Changing demographics portend an even more diverse student body in the future, with increasing numbers of Hispanics and other ethnic groups. Instruments that take cultural differences into account need to be developed.

Second, research is needed to clarify how much difference it makes if teaching methods are incongruent with a student's style. Studies that speak to the role and potency of style, seen in conjunction with other important variables, would help teachers significantly. The development of better instrumentation to identify styles should be a key part of such research.

Third, research is needed to illuminate the connections and interaction between style, developmental stage, disciplinary perspectives, and epistemology. A better understanding of the link between them would provide a helpful framework for examining teaching methodologies, the role of learning in individual development, and the use of the disciplines to promote more complex and integrative thinking.

Steps to Promote More Effective Learning

1. *Conduct professional development activities on the use of learning style in improving teaching and student development functions.*

Professional development should go beyond traditional practices like sabbaticals and travel to professional meetings, as important as they are. Workshops, the use of minigrants for instructional improvement projects, seminars, and other functions can be very useful in helping the participants understand the importance of style.

2. *Promote the concept of classroom research and make data about learning style an integral part of it.*

Classroom research is an important strategy in achieving a greater balance in the way many institutions prize research and undervalue teaching, and the definition of research should be broadened to include not only research in the specialized disciplines but also in teaching-learning processes related to teaching in the disciplines (Cross 1987). Information about style, when linked with other data about students, holds great promise for helping faculty members to improve their teaching. The collection and use of such data, done formally or informally, can also contribute to a continuing dialogue among faculty and administrators as they learn from each other about teaching and learning.

3. *Establish curricular experiences that focus on helping students learn how to learn.*

Orientation activities or a credit course called "An Introduction to College" can be geared toward helping students gain a greater understanding of how learning occurs and their responsibility in the process. Inventories of learning style and other processes can be used to help make students aware of their own preferences and strengths. Attention should also be given to helping them develop strategies for succeeding in courses taught in ways that are incongruent with their primary learning abilities.

4. *In hiring new faculty members, take into account candidates' understanding of teaching-learning practices that recognize individual differences, including learning style.*

In the next 10 to 20 years, colleges and universities will hire thousands of new faculty members. In the past, the Ph.D., with its emphasis on specialized study in the discipline and its predominant orientation to research, was taken as the necessary credential for teaching, but today, with an increasingly diverse student body and research that clearly identifies the elements of effective college teaching (Cross 1987), administrators are coming to a greater realization that faculty preparation should include other areas of knowledge as well. Research in student development, learning theory, and ways to use the creative tension between content and process are all important prerequisites for effective teaching. Administrators have the opportunity to make a major contribution to improved learning by hiring faculty who have such preparation.

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